

110TH CONGRESS  
2D SESSION

# S. RES. 705

Expressing the sense of the Senate on the commitment of the United States to the preservation of religious and cultural sites and condemning instances in which such sites are desecrated.

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## IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER 2 (legislative day, SEPTEMBER 17), 2008

Mr. BROWNBACK (for himself, Mr. LEVIN, and Mr. VOINOVICH) submitted the following resolution; which was considered and agreed to

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# RESOLUTION

Expressing the sense of the Senate on the commitment of the United States to the preservation of religious and cultural sites and condemning instances in which such sites are desecrated.

Whereas the Senate is committed to protecting and preserving the cultural heritage of all national, religious, and ethnic groups, including cemeteries and other sacred sites of those groups in the United States and abroad;

Whereas the Holocaust annihilated much of the Jewish population of Europe, and in many countries in Europe, no Jewish people were left to care for the communal properties that represent a historic culture in the area and constitute an integral part of the Jewish religion;

Whereas the Holocaust and 45 years of atheistic, Communist governments in Eastern Europe created a critical need that led to the establishment of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad under section 1303 of the International Security and Development Cooperation Act of 1985 (16 U.S.C. 469j);

Whereas the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad is tasked with identifying and reporting on cemeteries, monuments, and historic buildings in Eastern and Central Europe that are associated with the heritage of United States citizens and obtaining assurances from the governments in those regions that those properties will be protected and preserved;

Whereas many of those properties continue to be endangered and governments and communities continue to face fundamental and compelling challenges in the preservation of those properties;

Whereas experts within Lithuania and from around the world believe that the cemetery located in the Snipiskes area of Vilnius, Lithuania, is an historic Jewish cemetery and is sacred ground;

Whereas, in 2005, municipal authorities in Vilnius, Lithuania, approved the construction of an apartment building at the outer edge of that Jewish cemetery;

Whereas that cemetery dates to the 15th century and is known by scholars in Lithuania and around the world as the first Jewish cemetery in Vilnius;

Whereas it is believed that, before the Government closed the cemetery in the early 1800s, more than 50,000 Jews were buried there;

Whereas, in December 2006, several months after experts and groups from around the world expressed grave concern about the desecration of the Snipiskes cemetery, the Prime Minister of Lithuania established a working group to define the cemetery's borders and to consider how to memorialize it;

Whereas, in 2007, before the conclusion of the working group, authorities of the Government of Lithuania approved additional construction on the disputed ground;

Whereas, in May 2007, the working group, consisting of historians, scientists, and rabbis from Lithuania and around the world, called for a halt in construction activity until completion of a site study to be undertaken using ground-penetrating radar;

Whereas, on September 3, 2008, a group commissioned by the Government of Lithuania to study the area using the ground-penetrating radar concluded that the boundaries of the cemetery included the disputed apartment buildings;

Whereas the Ministry of Culture of Lithuania released a statement dismissing the study as inconclusive;

Whereas the fact that the Government of Lithuania has allowed construction to take place at the Jewish cemetery located in the Snipiskes area of Vilnius, Lithuania, and that desecration of sacred sites continues into the 21st century, is an affront to the international Jewish community, the people of the United States, and everyone who values religious freedom and ethnic diversity around the world;

Whereas the United States and Lithuania signed the Agreement on the Protection and Preservation of Certain Cultural Properties on October 15, 2002;

Whereas Article 1 of the Agreement states, “Each Party will take appropriate steps to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of all national, religious or ethnic groups . . . who reside or resided in its territory and were victims of genocide in its territory during the Second World War. The term ‘cultural heritage’ for purposes of this Agreement means . . . cemeteries and memorials to the dead . . . .”;

Whereas cemeteries are sacred sites and are established to remain undisturbed in perpetuity, and the sanctity of a cemetery is determined by the bodies buried in the cemetery; and

Whereas, while vandalism of headstones or construction of a commercial building on the site disgraces the cemetery, it does not change its sacred status: Now, therefore, be it

1       *Resolved*, That the Senate—

2               (1) expresses strongly to the Government of  
3       Lithuania that the cemetery located in the Snipiskes  
4       area of Vilnius, Lithuania, which is an important  
5       part of the cultural heritage of the Jewish people,  
6       should not be further desecrated;

7               (2) urges the Government of Lithuania to take  
8       all the necessary steps to immediately stop and, if  
9       necessary, reverse, construction on that cemetery;

1           (3) reaffirms that constructive bilateral rela-  
2           tions between Lithuania and the United States are  
3           important to the Governments and citizens of both  
4           countries; and

5           (4) expresses strong support for the work of the  
6           United States Commission for the Preservation of  
7           America's Heritage Abroad and for the European  
8           countries that continue to work to preserve sacred  
9           historical sites, despite ongoing challenges.

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